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With a particular focus on *The Saga of Grettir the Strong*, *Gisfi Surrson's Saga* and *Nijar's Saga*, discuss the nature and role of the supernatural in Icelandic saga literature and assess the extent to which it reveals a religious significance.

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At the end of the Viking Age, the Icelanders developed a literary tradition in the vernacular, Old Icelandic, in which the legendary tales of Iceland's *sogooki (the* Saga Age, c. 9E1030 CE) were written.' Hitherto sustained by the oral tradition (hence the designation *saga,* from *segja, to* say, tell'), the tales which constitute the *islendrgasogur (Sagas of Icelanders,* written between the twelfth and fourteenth centuries) journeyed through phases of Iceland's cultural evolution, most notably its political movement from the Commonwealth to the Norwegian monarchy in 1262 CE, and its religious conversion from Norse paganism to Christianity under the sovereignty of King Olaf Tryggvason (995-1000 CE). Chronicling events which occurred during and after this cultural whirlwind, the sagas in their present form reflect a mystical synthesis of Norse-pagan and Christian conceptions of the sacred, both of which incited a conviction in the Supernatural'. Despite their differences, they commonly present the Scandinavian world as one which interacts with unworldly beings and forces, and whilst this 'unworldliness' has contributed to the modern view that the sagas are 'pseudo-historical',[5] for the medieval Icelander, they were a record of historical truth. The truth' invested in the supernatural involves it, inevitably, in sacred matters, and the affiliation between the supernatural and the religious has thus been a highly debated topic among saga scholarship. In this essay, I will discuss the nature and role of the supernatural in Icelandic saga literature by examining examples from *The Saga of Grethr the Strong, Gisfi Surssan's Saga,* and *Nijar's Saga;* and from such analyses I will thereby assess the extent to which they each reveal a religious (specifically pagan or Christian) significance.

Firstly, let us define the term 'supernatural'. The *Collins English Dictionary* defines it as follows: of or relating to things beyond the laws of nature'. Indeed, the supernatural phenomena in the Icelandic sagas concern forces, beings and events which are naturally inexplicable; however, they are not really 'super—' *per se?* Rather than transcending the real world, the supernatural is incorporated within the worldly sphere, thus I agree with Ornolfur Thorsson that supernatural happenings are an integral component of the saga world, part of daily life and not a threat from a world beyond'. Rather than being 'otherworldly, the 'supernatural' in the sagas is something 'other', and this sense of obscurity is highlighted by Martin S. Regal's depiction of supernatural events as that which are 'accounted strange'.

This 'otherness' characterises the supernatural beings in *Gretties Saga,* such as thePtun(glants);' despite seeming other-worldly, they inhabit the natural terrain of Scandinavia, such as Thorir the troll who has dominion over a valley. Their bestial forms and superhuman strength, such as the *'tr011kona rnrkl*[l] which *'var sterkari en harm [Grettir_r* predicate their 'supernature', and their main role in the narrative is to challenge the hero physically. In facilitating Grettir's legendary career as a 'vanquisher of supernatural beings', his Victories over the *jotun* testify his adherence to the heroic creed: honour,

courage, and strength. His confrontation of the *jotun* during his outlawry thereby defends his heroic reputation against his social failure. The *Pain* are not only hybrid in their form, but in their being: situated half-way between reality and fantasy, their limbo-like' existence echoes the exilic situation of Grettir, whose peripheral existence locates him half-way between the domain of monsters and the human sphere. I would argue, therefore, that the supernatural beings in *Grettir's Saga* function as mythical counterparts to Grettir — the social misfit. The relationship between Grettir and his troll-protector, Thorir — a benevolent anomaly amidst his bestial opponents — is an endearing enactment of this shared experience of an exilic existence, and this reveals that the saga's supernatural background can function as a mythical mimesis of its sociopolitical foreground. As they are usually associated with the night (hence Thorkel's men deem it unlikely that a troll would have taken Skeggi in the day)' their nature is somewhat mysterious, and although I agree with Jim Kalb that the supernatural beings are 'treated in a convincingly matter-of-fact way,' their dark, marginal existences render their nature elusive, thus I agree with Lonnroth that such supernatural beings are glimpsed through a mythical haze'. Although the *fotun* are mythological vestiges of an active Norse-pagan cosmology, they do not have a religious function in *Grettir's Saga.*

Another form of supernatural beings in *Grettir:5 Saga* is the *draugar* (the 'unidead'): corporeal revenants who are not peacefully rested and can be physically slain. One form of the *draugar,* the *hawbuar* ('mound-dwellers') are usually malevolent beings who haunt people, such as Kar, and they tend to be destructive, like Glam who kills livestock (there are exceptions, however, such as the benevolent *ia.ttiorraugr,* Gunnar, in *Saga).'* Like thefitun, their role is to facilitate Grettir's 'ghostbusting' vocation, and his duels with such beings contribute to the melodramatic action of the saga tale. The extreme threat of death that they pose to Grettir enables him to be measured against the heroic code of honour which is alluded to in Njal's Saga, the more at stake, the more honour to be earned', and as Glam confesses in *Grettes Saga, 'ghouls'* make the heroic odyssey 'more interesting'. Although they can be slain, their supernatural powers can outlive them, such as the curse (to be afraid of the dark and to be ill-fated) which Glam lays upon Grettir. This curse event is the pivotal climax of the plot as it upturns Grettir's fortune, and this reveals that supernatural beings can often function as plot-driving mechanisms. Although the *draugar* are a characteristic of pre-Christian legends across medieval Europe, their role in sagas and romances in post-Conversion societies became appropriated to a Christian lesson: as Andrew Jaynes notes, 'medieval accounts of ghosts were used to convey [...] the punishment of those who ignored the demands of [God]' and they were 'exemplary accounts of their suffering after death'. This is exemplified by Glam, whose profanities against the Christian rites of fasting and other 'worthless' sacraments cause his sudden death and discontented afterlife. The religious significance of this supernatural event lies in its teaching that Christian heresy is met with divine retribution, and a comparable example is the sudden death of Valgard after his descration of Morel's Christian property in *Saga.* Michael W. Ford's suggestion that the *draugar* are 'demons possessing a body' depicts them as evil forces which, in medieval notions of dualism, will be in continuous combat with Christian goodness until the ultimate apocalyptic victory of God, the Alpha and Omega' (cf. Revelation 22:13). I would argue, therefore, that accounts of supernatural beings can have a religious significance to the extent that they facilitate the author's promotion of the Christian lifestyle, thus I agree with William R. Short that 'the Viking-age pagan world about which the Christian authors wrote was filtered through their own outlook on life'.

In addition to supernatural beings, supernatural events also reveal a Christian significance. In *Njars Saga,* the subjection of both Christianity and paganism to an ordeal by fire, *!ael ver skulum reyna &yr barn er triion",* implicates the divine verdict of God, by which Christianity is proven to be the truth faith. Further, the triumph of Christianity is reliant on this divine revelatory power which is expected at the Althing, *of flag er milad *rid- a5 trOa*

pessi skull vig gangast as mun a alPingi', and here, the word *cz[lad* (inf. tfa, 'to intend') indicates another form of the supernatural at work: *wyrd* (fate). In *Nijar's Saga,* the legalisation of Christianity is perceived as a predestined outcome of fate, via the Icelanders who were 'destined to make the faith.'

Although fate is a pre-Christian motif that derived from Norse paganism and can still be traced in the sagas (cf. the allusion to the 'norns', 'Goddesses of Destiny',' in *Njals Saga* via the valkyrie model *¯Tatum eigi/ If trans farast,/ eiga valkyrjur/ vats um kosti),* its pagan significance is diluted, even when it is not given a Christian significance. Seemingly distanced from its polytheistic roots, it functions as an independent universal force which governs the destinies of humans. Arguably, the Christian authors attempted to dissociate the forces of fate from its pagan authority in order to diffuse its heathen resonance whilst retaining its narratorial function in the saga stories.

In the sagas concerned, the plot revolves around the *hverfanda* ('wheel of Fortune'),and by nature, its pre-destined rotations are inexorable, as noted by Thord in *Njal's Saga, fkAl mut? tner Pao StOaa [. of trrer er Para milao' ;* once again, the word tla indicates the functioning of fate. Ill-fate functions as a prohibition of social success, exemplified by Atli's lack of favour with the Norwegian monarchy owing to his *og* (bad luck); Hrut's slaying of Atli confirms his ill-fate" exemplifies the way in which the tragic unfolding of ill-fated prophesies confirms their inescapable nature. Hruts intuition that *opo [Atli] m&iir feigum munni*° depicts fate as an integral part of a character's being, and the narrator's claim in *Gisfi's Saga* that Tate must find someone to speak through' reveals that fate is destructively exerted through, not merely upon, the lives of the Icelanders. In its government over death, it is depicted as the tragic flaw of all humans, 'let one fate await us all', and this is exemplified by its instigation of the heroes' tragic inevitability of death. As noted by Skarphedin, Njal's fate to be burned to death is unavoidable, *'pvi ar3 fast MEun annar3 til eldkveikpa of Pess verdur audi PO a8/7O:117 se* Similarly, Grettir's tragic end is a result of his being an *eigft.imacIur* ['unlucky man') and the alliterative 'g' in Grettir's verse *'Mitt war gilt/ ga-uleysi'* links the words 'lack' and 'good fortune' to poetically highlight his misfortunate character. For Grettir, fate is his most relentless enemy, his every step is opposed by Providence'," and for Gisli alike, his outlawry is a result of ill-fate, *'hamr vi ri eigi folium hiutum gr.famaclur";* once again, this highlights that ill-fate is a socially disruptive force. I disagree with Olason that As explicit a comment as this is rare in the sagas' as explicit statements regarding the ill-fate of characters are frequent (most notably, chapter 39 of *Grettirs Saga* compacts five explicit references to Grettir's ill-fate five times into a short passage). On the basis that fateful prophesies are always fulfilled, I agree with Jim Kalb that 'Supernatural foreshadowings tie the events in the story together for the reader, adding to their coherence and thus oddly to the plausibility of the story as something that had to happen as it did'. Although I would argue that its literary function outweighs its religious role, as aforesaid, fate has a religious significance to the extent that it is sometimes depicted as an agent of Iceland's Christian destiny.

The supernatural is also manifested in sorcery: vulnerable to human exploitation, this magical power galvanises the malevolent machinations of the saga villains, such as Thorgrim Nef who uses *VolAynrigilega'* (witchcraft) to obstruct Gisli's search for allies, and witchcraft is often a vehicle for feminine manipulations. For example, Gunnhild's *guaringur* gift to Hrut in *Ayes Saga* is invested with a magical form of her sexual power,and her intimate behaviour in this scene, *V˙16˙2 tok hondum urn hats honum ag kyssti hailt7;* reflects the sexual agenda of her magic spell: 'I cast this spell: you will not have sexual pleasure with the woman you plan to marry in Iceland'.' This reveals that the role of witchcraft is often to empower the powerless, such as women, and I therefore agree with Olason that 'Female sexuality and secret knowledge of magic are seen as threats to the male dominated social order'. The curse

of skrfpf (‘monsters’) and *tin&* Cwondersr upon Osvif and his men reflects the way in which supernatural spells and curses function as threatening menaces to the human world, and the curse of the *boka* (fog)[56] reveals that nature is often a medium through which supernature exercises its destructive powers; another example of this would be Audbjorg’s magical arousal of a snowstorm which kills twelve men.

Often, magical interludes interrupt the main narrative of the saga — such as the account of Thorgrim Nes magical reconstruction of *Grasida* into a spear which interrupts the scene of Gisli’s feast — and I would argue that this disjointed narrative form reflects the way in which magic is a disruptive force of the social arena. Further, such magical flights from the sociopolitical reality of the saga world transport the audience back into the mysterious realm of fantasy, and this sustains the melodramatic excitement of the saga. In addition to its narrative function — mainly to establish the contest between heroes and their villains — the sinister depictions of necromancy serve the author’s Christian polemic against heathen customs which, according to Martin S. Regal’s translation, are practised as an ‘obscene and black art in devilish perversity’. I favour this translation because the word ‘devilish’ highlights the Roman Catholic view of the Middle Ages that necromancy was a demonic force of evil. The dark, cold settings for magical events echo the moral darkness of evil sorcery — such as the bleak setting of Audbjorg’s supernatural destruction whereby the ‘still’ and ‘cloudless’ sky" reflects the spiritual barrenness of heathen magic — and through the saga characters, Christian teachings are subtly expressed: ‘Be wary of sorcery; few things are mightier than black magic’ *(Grettit’s Saga).* The magical curses put upon Grettir by his anti-Christian foes, Glam and Thurid, reveal that supernatural events can be used to demonstrate the ways in which anti-Christian forces of evil lead to personal catastrophes.

Although heathen forces are thus presented as potent, they are superseded by a form of Christian ‘magic’: miracles. These supernatural phenomena — such as the sword falling out of the berserk’s hand when he is touched by Thangbrand’s crucifix" — have a religious significance to the extent that they were believed to be true theophanies of divine power. This miracle event also functions as a parable, teaching that Christ’s peace-ethic ought to be prioritised over warfare, hence Thang brand *"bar [...] rodukross frir skjoiceinn:* The word used to describe this miracle event in *Njals Saga* is *jartegn,’* (Sign’ or ‘token’), highlighting the way in which this event is a ‘sign’ of Christian truth; the Christian significance of this word is evidenced by a Norwegian runic inscription in Bergen (NB524M) which uses the word *jartegn* to mean ‘miracle.’ The miracle accounts thereby have a religious significance to the extent that they are recounted for an evangelistic purpose: to convert the audience or confirm their existent faith by presenting them with evidential accounts of Christian reality. Nevertheless, a cultural reverence for the pagan gods is preserved in poetic passages, in which they often serve metaphorical function via kennings, such as ‘Odin’s fires’ i.e. swords . When the pagan forces *are* involved in sacred matters, they are usually presented as the supernatural opponents of God, and some supernatural events reflect the medieval Scandinavian belief that the pagan and Christian forces struggled in continuous combat, such as the event of Thangbrand’s horse being consumed by the earth which is believed to be a result of heathen vengeance against the Christians. In response to such events, the pagan forces are usually depicted as the defeated opposition of the pre-eminent warrior Christ, exemplified by Stein unn’s affirmation that Thor is an inferior deity to the almighty God, *arl Per var eke neva mold og aska ef guel wick egi ad ham lif9i:* and although this myth presents the pagan pantheon as co-existent with the Christian God, it has a Christian significance to the extent that it promotes the supremacy of the God’s power.

Supernatural visions often have a religious significance to the extent that they often reveal Christ’s mission to recruit the Icelanders to his spiritual militia, epitomised by Kolskegg’s dream-vision of an illuminated man seeking knightly allegiance.’ Functioning

alongside accounts of conversions, baptisms, pilgrimages, and fasts, such supernatural revelations promote the Christian lifestyle. Similarly, Gisli's oneiric encounter with the good dream-woman communicates the salvific message of Christianity: by partaking in Christ's suffering, salvation in heaven is made possible. The Eucharistic overtones of Gisli's vision of 'sacrificial blood' depicts him as a suffering comrade of the sacrificial messiah, thus I agree with G. Turville-Petre that he is presented as a 'Christian martyr'. Whilst I agree with Olason that the saga 'world is tangible and earthy, not an ersatz transit lounge en route to blissful oblivion in the afterlife' to the extent that supernatural happenings occur within the worldly sphere, I would argue that such dream-visions become that 'ersatz transit lounge' to the Christian 'afterlife' through their prophetic trajectory to paradise: 'Better things soon await you'. I thereby disagree strongly with Olason's comment that *Gisli's Saga 'does* not focus on religious issues, and no conflict can bet detected between Christian and pagan ethics',' as the good dream-woman's supernatural manifestation has a sermonic function: through her, the Christianised author instructs the audience to 'stop following the old faith' and relinquish the violent ways of Iceland's Viking Age, 'Do not be the first to kill'," and, in opposition to Olason's argument, he thereby demarcates the moral disparity between pagan evil and Christian goodness.

In conclusion, the 'supernatural' in Icelandic Saga may be defined as follows: paranormal beings, forces, and events, whose assimilation into the saga chronicle ascertains their narratoria I, cultural, and/ or religious significance; in essence, they are worldly manifestations of the unworldly. Whereas the pagan culture is fossilised in the sagas' traditional backdrop, with references to 'Yule' and *'veturnattabicir* (Winter Nights festival), the Christian setting has a more active role in the saga narrative; Christian events such as St. Michael's Day illustrate a living spiritual fellowship between the Scandinavians and their heavenly °*ye* (friend'), God, thus the supernatural has a religious significance to the extent that it can animate the spiritual immediacy of the sagas for the Christian audience. Culminating with explicit Christian references, all three sagas herald the advent of the new faith, and *Grebes Saga* obtains an almost scriptural status via its postscript: *'Amen:* The fact that the literary society of Iceland developed particularly since its Christianisation in 1000 CE must not be overlooked, and as Olason notes, the missionary agenda of the ecclesiastical sphere found its communicative channel in vernacular literature I thus conclude that the supernatural events in saga literature have a religious significance to the extent that they facilitated the authors' missions to promulgate the Christian future of Iceland through the legends of its heroic past.

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